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GORAL – CAN WE LET GOD ROLL THE DICE?

The Hebrew word *goral* is translated today as “fate.” That implies a deterministic view of the world, which is not necessarily the meaning of the word (or the concept) in its original form. A *goral* was originally a small stone, used for casting lots. In the Bible, the *goral* was used to determine the outcome of unclear choices or futures.¹ But did the *goral* reflect a pre-determined, divine fate, or was it just a random roll of the dice? In this essay, we will examine these two approaches and their impact on Jewish thought.

Goral is the basis of two of God’s commandments and, as such, should be viewed as having divine sanction.² However, other “magical” practices, also used to determine the best path for future action, are forbidden, such as *nibush* (divination).³ The difference between the two can help us understand the nature of *goral*. Why is *goral* permitted, while *nibush* is forbidden?

First, it is significant, as the biblical scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann pointed out, that the Torah bans “virtually all of the techniques employed by paganism for obtaining oracles. This ban applies not only to inquiries addressed to ‘other gods’; it is an unconditional ban.”⁴ It is forbidden for us to use these methods even to inquire of God.

Then why is *goral* permitted? One difference between *goral* and *nibush* is that in *goral* God gives the determining sign, whereas in *nibush* the human participant determines whether the sign is fortuitous or not. As Kaufmann put it, “[the lots] are the simplest, most unsophisticated method of decision making. They address God rather than nature, and

¹ There are cases where it is used to investigate past events, but always in order to decide on the proper future action.

² Choosing the goats in the Yom Kippur service and dividing up the land among the tribes, as we shall discuss below.

³ Deuteronomy 18:9–11.

⁴ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Shocken, 1972), 87.

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express complete reliance upon [His] decision rather than upon a science of omens.”⁵ With *goral*, we are instructed to fully follow God’s will and not try to manipulate it for our own purposes.

In this approach, *goral* reflects God’s will. However, this is not the only way *goral* has been interpreted. Others have understood *goral* as being random. These competing views are both represented in verses in Proverbs. One verse represents the view that God’s intentions are displayed in the *goral*: “The lot [*goral*] is cast into the pouch; the decision depends on God” (Proverbs 16:33). As understood by the rabbis, the verse should be understood as saying “the *goral* is cast into the pouch, for the decision depends on God.”⁶

However, there are difficulties with this approach. First, since the institution of prophecy was still functioning during the biblical period, why was *goral* necessary to determine God’s will?⁷ Could God not tell the people directly what they should know and do in cases of uncertainty? Secondly, if *goral* allows us to access God’s opinion, why is it not always the preferred choice? Why have trials by judges based on evidence and arguments? Should discovering the truth not be the paramount goal? Why not just cast lots?

This leads us to the alternate conclusion. Perhaps *goral* does *not* allow us access to heavenly truths that would normally be unobtainable with our limited human intellect. On the contrary—*goral* is as random as rolling dice or flipping a coin and should only be used when justice cannot be served by our investigations of the truth. *Goral* as “chance” favors no party, and while it does not approach “objective” truth, it does provide impartiality as justice. This competing view is found in a different verse in Proverbs: “The lot [*goral*] puts an end to strife and separates those locked in dispute” (18:18).

The verse does not mention miracles or any other type of divine involvement. The *goral* is simply a method of achieving compromise between the two disputing parties.⁸

These two conceptions of *goral* stand in the background of a significant halakhic debate over the nature of *nibush* and how it relates to *goral*.

⁵ Kaufmann, 92.

⁶ The pouch, or fold of the upper garment, is where stones for the *goral* were stored; see *Bereishit Rabba* 98:2, also Ralbag on this verse.

⁷ The contrast between divination and prophecy is evident from the juxtaposition of the prohibition of the former (Deuteronomy 18:9–14) and the rules of the latter (18:15–22). Israel is instructed to turn to prophets to discover God’s will. See Shadal, Hirsch, and Malbim on Deuteronomy 18:15.

⁸ See Radak and Meiri on this verse and Malbim on Proverbs 18:17.

Nihush refers to one saying that such things as “his bread fell out of his mouth” or “a raven calls to him” are bad omens (as defined in *Sanhedrin* 65b).

Maimonides codifies this into law in his *Mishneh Torah*:

It is forbidden to practice divination as the idolaters do, as it is said: “You shall not practice divination” (Leviticus 19:26). How is divination practiced? For instance, those who say: “Seeing that the bread fell out of my mouth,” or “my cane fell out of my hand I shall not go today to that place, for if I do go, my desire will not be fulfilled; seeing that a fox passed by my right hand I shall not leave my door step today, for if I do leave, a false person will encounter me.” Likewise those who hear the chirping of a bird say: “It will be so, but not so; it is good to do that thing and bad to do the other thing.” So are those who say: “Kill this rooster, he crowed during the evening; kill that hen, she crows like a rooster.” So, too, is one who sets certain signs for himself to regulate his actions, saying: “If such a thing will come to pass, I shall do that thing, but if it will not come to pass, I shall not do it,” as Eliezer, Abraham’s servant did. And so are all like practices of such things forbidden. And whoever commits an act because of any one of such practices is lashed. One who said: “This dwelling which I built will be a good omen for me, this woman whom I married or this animal that I purchased was blessed. From the time I purchased it onward, I have become rich,” and, likewise, one who asks a child, “What verse are you studying?” If he mentioned to him a verse of the blessings, he may rejoice and say: “This is a good omen.” All such and the like are permitted; seeing that he neither regulated his actions nor withheld himself from performing them by these signs. Rather, because he made for himself a mark of a thing which already had come to pass—this is permitted.⁹

Maimonides clearly establishes that making decisions for the future based on unrelated events in the present is forbidden. He brings the examples of Abraham’s servant Eliezer searching for a bride for Isaac (Genesis 24:14) and Saul’s son Jonathan seeing if he would defeat the Philistines (I Samuel 14:8–12), as mentioned in *Hullin* 95b: “But doesn’t Rav say that any divination that is not like Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, or like Jonathan, son of Saul, is not divination?” While the commentaries on that passage attempt to justify their behavior, as codified by Maimonides it is strictly forbidden.

⁹ *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 11:4–5.

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The second example Maimonides brings, of when one can consider something a positive sign, is also found in *Hullin* 95b. However, here he differs from the original Talmudic passage, which says: “Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says, ‘a house, a child and a woman—although there is no divination, they are a sign.’”

The plain meaning of this passage, as understood by Rashi and others, is that one can use these “signs” as evidence that things will continue to go well. Maimonides, however, will not allow any form of divination, and explains that these signs are merely ways of interpreting the past.

This approach of Maimonides did not go unchallenged. Raavad claims that Maimonides misinterprets the actions of Eliezer and Jonathan:

This is a great mistake, for this is definitely permissible. Perhaps [Maimonides] was misled by the formulation that he saw: “Any diviner who is not like Eliezer and Jonathan is not a diviner,” and he believed that the intention there was to indicate the prohibition. But this is not so; the text merely means: “It is not worth relying [on such signs].” How could [Maimonides] attribute this transgression [of divination] to such righteous people? Had they been alive, they would send out a fiery flame at him.

According to Raavad, there are occasions that omens should not be followed, but there is no universal prohibition. Ran provides a solution. He writes that planning for the future based on logical considerations, as opposed to superstitious reasons, is not considered *nibush*.¹⁰ This would likely be acceptable to Maimonides, whose concern was the risk of superstitious beliefs.

Commentators also take issue with what Maimonides writes about interpreting positive signs. *Kesef Mishneh*, for example, writes that this was not the meaning of the talmudic text, and those that would ask children for their daily verse were trying to determine what future actions to take. But Maimonides insists on removing any connection between unrelated phenomena and planning future events, because of the dangers of *nibush*. And why was he so opposed to *nibush* and similar practices? Because they are false methods and distance people from the truth:

These things are all false and deceptive, and they are what the ancient idolaters used to mislead the people of the countries and to deceive them into following them. And it is not proper for Israel... to imagine that there is any profit in them.... Whoever believes in these things and the like and considers in his heart that they are true and pertain to wisdom,

¹⁰ *Hiddushei ha-Ran, Sanhedrin* 65a.

but that the Torah has forbidden them, is nothing but a fool, deficient in understanding.... But wise people of faultless understanding will know by clear proofs that all these things which the Torah has prohibited do not pertain to wisdom, but are worthless and inane; the deficient in understanding are those who are attracted by them and abandon the ways of truth on their account. Therefore, the Torah, in warning us against all these inanities, has said, "You shall be faultless with the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13).¹¹

Maimonides' critique of those "deficient in understanding" did not go undisputed. Nahmanides quotes Maimonides, but rejects his approach:

There are many who belittle the reading of omens and say that they have no truth to them at all, for who tells the raven or the crane what will be? But we cannot deny things that are publicly seen.¹²

Nahmanides says that although we might not understand how omens work, we cannot deny their efficacy, since we see that they have predicted success or failure. However, that requires accepting that our perceptions can never mislead us. Optical illusions are examples of where something we see does not reflect reality. Our tendency to find patterns where they do not exist is another. R. Hirsch makes this point explicitly:

[S]uperstition supplies a connection between cause and effect which has absolutely no existence. Between the black cat, the raven, etc., between the bit that falls from your mouth... and the success or failure of an undertaking, the lucky or unlucky future of anybody, there is no causative connection thinkable. This can neither be the result of those occurrences, nor can such occurrences be taken to be the effects of some future happening starting now. Nevertheless to ascribe some influence on future happenings... is just to satisfy your urge to understand events by completely ignoring the non-existence of all the intermediate stages which would be necessary to bring about such a result. *Nihush* of this kind would simply be senseless laughable absurdity did it not at the same time involve a denial of God's free-willed government of the world, and exercise a pernicious checking influence on Man's free-willed activities, for which, regarding their purpose, their admissibility or their moral necessity, God has referred up solely to His Torah, as well as, regarding their

¹¹ *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 11:16.

¹² Commentary to Deuteronomy 18:9.

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practicability, to the sense of the true relationship of things which He has given us.¹³

In other words, it is our actions alone which determine how future events will unfold. If we relinquish the effect of our actions, we give up our responsibility as well.

Since this debate is not merely philosophical, but germane to halakhic matters as well, a verdict is found in the codes of Jewish law. Rema presents both opinions, but rules that the approach of Maimonides is preferable:

There are those who say that one is allowed to make a sign for the future, as did Eliezer and Jonathan, and there are those who say that it is forbidden. And those who place their trust and complete heart in God will be surrounded by kindness.¹⁴

Rema's conclusion alludes to "You shall be faultless with the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 18:13), which was quoted by Maimonides and is the basis for the prohibition of divination. That same verse is mentioned by Rema a few paragraphs earlier, where *Shulhan Arukh* says that in addition to other superstitious practices (such as astrology), the *goral* is forbidden as well, because of the obligation to "be faultless with the Lord your God."¹⁵

The prohibition here on *goral* is surprising. In other places in *Shulhan Arukh*, we see examples where *goral* is permitted.¹⁶ The difference between the permitted and forbidden types of *goral* goes back to the conception of *goral* itself. If it is viewed as a random but fair way to resolve disputes, it is permitted. However, if it is considered to be a method of determining the truth, then it becomes divination, and is forbidden.¹⁷

By this process, halakha has answered the question of how we should perceive *goral*. By dividing *goral* into two different conceptions, *goral* is removed from the popular perception that it should be used as a type of

¹³ Commentary on Leviticus 19:26. See also Ralbag's commentary on the same verse.

¹⁴ *Yoreh De'ah* 179:4.

¹⁵ *Yoreh De'ah* 179:1. See also *Bah* on *Tur*, *Yoreh De'ah* 179:4, who writes that *goral* and astrology are "one and the same."

¹⁶ Business partners are allowed to divide shared property with *goral* in *Hoshen Mishpat* 173:2; parents can use the *goral* to divide portions of food among family members in *Orah Hayyim* 322:6.

¹⁷ R. Shlomo Pappenheim, *Yeri'ot Shelomo* 1:4 (cited by Malbim on Leviticus 19:26), writes that if one assumes the *goral* will tell him the true way to act (as opposed to making it easier to decide), it is forbidden as *nibush*. For further discussion of Pappenheim's approach, see R. Elchanan Adler, *Asher Hanan* (RIETS, 2016), 139–140.

divination (in the more general sense of “a process of determining divine purpose or knowledge”) and kept as a tool for resolving disputes through acceptance of random results. In fact, this process of undermining the popular but misguided conception of *goral* began even earlier, in the biblical texts themselves.

The biblical passage which dedicates the most attention to the concept of *goral* is Joshua’s conquest of the Land of Israel, when the land was divided among the tribes by casting lots.¹⁸ Rashi observes that the *goral* was directed by God in such a way that the land area each tribe received would be in proportion to its population.¹⁹ Abarbanel, however, challenges Rashi by pointing out that Numbers 26:54 says “with larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share.” According to this verse, there is a commandment for Israel to allocate the land according to population, and it was not left to the *goral*. He writes that the *goral* would determine in which region of the Land each tribe’s inheritance would be, but the *size* of the territory would be according to population. According to Abarbanel, there was no predetermined plan of which tribe should receive which territory, and the purpose of the *goral* was to prevent fighting among the tribes.²⁰

Goral was also used in stories without a divine commandment to do so. The sailors in the book of Jonah and Haman in the book of Esther provide prominent biblical examples of non-Jews using the *goral*.

In the book of Jonah, the sailors use the *goral* to determine who is responsible for the terrible storm: “The men said to one another, ‘Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us.’ They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah” (1:7). When the sailors cast lots, they were trying to access a level of truth that was hidden from them. But was it really necessary?

After casting the lots, they confront Jonah. But they are still not sure who was responsible for the calamity. The language used in the following verse is significant: “‘Tell us,’ they said to him, ‘on whose account has this evil come to us?’” (1:8).

The same phrase, “on whose account” is used in both verses. This indicates that before casting lots they wanted to know “on whose account” the misfortune came, and they still needed an answer to that question after

¹⁸ Joshua 18–19. The command to use *goral* for this purpose appears earlier, in Numbers 26:55–56.

¹⁹ Rashi on Numbers 26:54.

²⁰ Abarbanel on Numbers 26:52.

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the lots had been cast. Abarbanel writes that after the *goral* they needed to do an investigation because maybe the *goral* was arbitrary.²¹ That same doubt could have precluded them from casting lots in the first place.

In response to the investigation, Jonah readily admits he is the cause of the storm. Instead of taking the time to cast lots, all they needed to do was ask Jonah one more question. An earnest investigation, without the *goral*, would have sufficed.

Although the *goral* did point to Jonah, had he chosen to object, he could have claimed it was unjust to have selected him in this manner. The sailors themselves did not seem to have full confidence in the *goral* before casting Jonah into the heart of the sea. Even though they recognized that “O Lord, by Your will, have you brought this about,” they still prayed, “Oh, please, Lord, do not let us perish on account of this man’s life. Do not hold us guilty of killing an innocent person!”²² Without that confidence why take the risk of using the *goral* at all?²³

A difficulty we have when judging the use of *goral* in the Jonah story is that we readers know Jonah’s past before he boards the boat. The sailors did not. How would the story look to us if we did not know that God was angry with Jonah and the *goral* was still cast? Allowing for the possibility that Jonah was not guilty, one of two scenarios could have transpired. Either the *goral* could have landed on him and he would have been falsely convicted, or it would not have landed on him and the sailors would have been convinced that it was an ineffective method of determining guilt (after possibly killing an innocent person instead!). Both hypothetical scenarios show that using the *goral* to establish certainty is wrong. If use of the *goral* cannot entertain the possibility that Jonah was innocent, it should not have been used at all.

The story, while not discrediting the process of the *goral*, does undercut its necessity, and suggests there are far more reliable methods for discovering the truth.

A strong refutation of the validity of *goral* is found in the book of Esther. Haman famously casts lots (translated as *purim* in the biblical

²¹ Commentary on Jonah 1:8.

²² Jonah 1:14. The phrase “do not hold us guilty” (literally, “do not lay upon us innocent blood”), is similar to the recitation found in the *egla arufa* ceremony, in which the leaders say, “do not lay innocent blood among your people Israel” (Deuteronomy 21:8). In both scenarios there is doubt as to who is ultimately responsible for the victim’s fate.

²³ For a discussion of the ethical dilemma of casting lots in a modern situation, parallel to the story of Jonah, see Sid Z. Leiman, “The Ethics of Lottery,” *Kennedy Institute Quarterly Report* 4 (Summer 1978), 8–11.

text²⁴) to determine the ideal date to exterminate the Jews. While he certainly did not believe in the Jewish God, he clearly thought that through this method he would be able to reveal the most auspicious date for his scheme. However, nothing in the plot of the story would have changed had Haman chosen the same date, the thirteenth of Adar, because of rational or strategic considerations. His plans fail because of the actions of Esther (and the hidden hand of God); his method of choosing the date turns out to be meaningless. His conviction that he could gain certainty through *goral* is a source of ridicule in the Book of Esther. In the end, it was the ingenuity of Esther, not the augury of Haman that was successful. The holiday itself was ironically named “Purim” to celebrate his defeat.²⁵ The misguided understanding of the term *goral* in the sense of fate, instead of randomness, became the title of the parody.

Another story with a lottery (although not mentioning the word *goral* explicitly) is the episode of Achan.²⁶ Before the fall of Jericho, Joshua declared that all the spoils were to be dedicated to God, and it was forbidden for anyone to take anything from the city into their own possession.²⁷ Achan defied the ban, and, as a result, the Israelites were defeated when they attempt to conquer the town of Ai. To determine the guilty party, God instructed Joshua to cast lots among the tribes, then by clans, then by families, and finally the lots would determine the identity of the guilty

²⁴ Esther 3:7, 9:24, where *pur* is identified with the Hebrew *goral*. *Pur* derives from the Akkadian *purru*, of the same meaning.

²⁵ R. Yaakov Medan suggests the enemies of the Jews called the scheduled day of slaughter “Purim,” in the leadup to the appointed day, as a sign of their belief in the power of the lottery. The Book of Esther adopted the same name for the Jewish holiday to emphasize the ridicule. See Yaakov Medan, “Purim and Yom Kippur” (www.etzion.org.il/en/purim-and-yom-kippur).

²⁶ While the verses do not actually mention the word *goral*, the use of the verb *lakad*, “to indicate,” (Joshua 7:14) shows that a type of *goral* was used. The same verb is found in a similar story in I Samuel 14:41–42, where Saul ordered the use of the Urim and Thummim to determine who had violated his command. The Urim and Thummim performed the function of *goral* (see Rashi and Radak on I Samuel 14:41). In the story in Samuel, as well as some other mentions of them in the Bible, the Urim and Thummim are clearly used as a method to determine God’s will. As Ralbag comments on Numbers 27:21, Joshua needed this means of communication with God, since he did not possess the higher-level prophecy of Moses. The priests were the only ones qualified to interpret the Urim and Thummim—they were never meant to be equivalent to divination methods used by common people. Perhaps that is the reason that while they share common verbs, the Urim and Thummim are not directly called *goral*. The opinion of Maharsha (on *Bava Batra* 122a), who distinguishes between the level of divine involvement between the Urim and Thummim and the *goral*, is worth noting.

²⁷ Joshua 6:17–19.

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man. Once confronted, Achan confessed. The biblical text appears to support the approach that *goral* can reveal the truth in a more accurate manner than any investigation could have provided.

However, a daring midrash presents the use of *goral* here in a different light:

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Joshua: “Israel has sinned” (Joshua 7:11), Joshua said to Him: Master of the Universe, who is the one who has sinned? God said to him: Am I an informer? Go cast lots and find out for yourself. Joshua then went and cast lots, and the lot fell upon Achan. Achan said to him: Joshua, do you come to execute me merely based on a lot, without any corroborating evidence? You and Elazar the Priest are the two most distinguished leaders of the generation, but if I cast a lot upon the two of you, it will perforce fall upon one of you. What then can you prove from a lottery? Joshua said to him: I ask of you, do not spread slander about the lots, as the Land of Israel will one day be divided by lots, as it is stated: “Nevertheless, the land shall be divided by lot” (Numbers 26:55).²⁸

At first glance, the midrash defends *goral*. It shows how *goral* is justified, by its use both for the important tasks of incriminating Achan and dividing up the land. However, below the surface lies a critique of *goral*, or at least the popular perception of it as a lofty method to ascertain God’s will. *Goral* needed a defense because it was misunderstood.

Achan was arguing to Joshua that the randomness of *goral* (“it will perforce fall upon one of you”) is unfair in determining guilt. The entire justification of using the *goral* for dividing the land was that it was impartial and fair (not a deliberate selection by God). If *goral* was slandered by no longer being seen as fair, then the division of land would not succeed, as it too would no longer be viewed that way. The midrash implies that Joshua could have avoided that potential slander by not using *goral* in the first place.

The Torah gives clear directions for investigating serious crimes such as these: “You shall make a thorough inquiry, and if it is true, the fact is established, that abhorrent thing was perpetrated in Israel, you shall take the man... and you shall stone them to death.”²⁹ The Torah mentions a

²⁸ *Sanhedrin* 43b. In a variant found in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 6:3 [27b], Achan sarcastically asks Joshua: “Moses has only been dead for 30 or 40 days. Did you already forget that he taught us ‘A person shall be put to death only on the testimony of two or more witnesses?’” (Deuteronomy 17:6).

²⁹ Deuteronomy 17:4–5. Achan was executed by stoning (Joshua 7:25).

“thorough inquiry” but never suggests asking God or using techniques like the *goral*. The midrash suggests that Joshua was not using the proper methods. God only offers the *goral* as a last resort.

Secondly, Joshua has no defense of the *goral* as a tool to execute justice. He never claims that the *goral* was not arbitrary. He does not argue that the *goral* revealed the truth. The midrash does not have Joshua say, “It found you, and you are guilty! That is the best proof that *goral* works!” Rather, Joshua only begs that Achan refrain from disparaging the *goral* so the division of the land by that method will still be accepted by the people, and the tribes will not clash over who got which land. To “put an end to strife,” *goral* needed to appear fair.

God’s reluctance to participate actively and Achan’s arguments indicate that a proper investigation and trial would have been the preferred method of dispensing justice. Maimonides notes this explicitly:

Know that Joshua’s execution of Achan was a temporary [suspension of the] law, because our true Torah does not inflict the penalty of death on a sinner either by his own confession, or by *goral*, or by the vision of a prophet that the accused had done the deed.³⁰

Like the story of Jonah above, in the end the *goral* does accurately incriminate Achan. Does the outcome of the *goral* in these stories not testify to its validity?

As we saw above in our discussion of the development of the halakha regarding divination, the Torah is trying to educate against the use of *goral* as a means of determining certainty (as opposed to simply avoiding disputes). Just as Maimonides claimed that the sacrifices were instituted to gradually wean the people away from their belief in idolatry, it appears to me that God, aware that the masses believed in the power of magic and augury, was trying to wean them from those mistaken ideas as well.³¹ The primary goal was to forbid the various practices of divination and sorcery, while still enabling the ambiguity about their effectiveness. *Goral* was the only remaining acceptable outlet for this problematic belief—and in time, its nature would also be understood.

With Jonah and Achan, the *goral* “works” but there are problems with its use. In the story of Achan, the midrash emphasizes the problem

³⁰ Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishna, *Sanhedrin* 6:2 (Kafah ed.). The earlier translation from Rambam’s Judeo-Arabic that appears in standard editions of the Talmud does not include “or by *goral*.”

³¹ *Guide* 3:32. The use of *goral* by the non-Jewish sailors and Haman shows just how ingrained it was in the surrounding cultures.

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with relying on *goral* for certainty. And in the story of Jonah, it was not actually necessary to use it (and would have been morally problematic in the extreme without Jonah's confession). God makes *goral* work, but does so reluctantly.

While both stories support the use and outcome of *goral*, I suggest that the way the stories are written (and interpreted) supports a second, ironic reading, which undermines the "traditional" view of *goral*. This understanding is particularly evident when contrasting the story of Achan in the text of the Book of Joshua with the way the midrash relates the story. Although Joshua shows no reservations about the lottery process in the biblical text, the midrash portrays his full ambivalence. We, the readers of the midrash, are intended to experience that same uncertainty.

To be clear, the stories do not imply that *goral* is arbitrary, or that God was not involved in the results. But they do show that its use was both unnecessary (because the guilty party could have been found without resorting to the *goral*) and inappropriate (because had the *goral* landed on anyone else it would have been a travesty of justice). Vindication does not equal justification. That is outcome bias, where we incorrectly judge the quality of a decision by how it turned out, instead of by the process that led us to that outcome. *Goral* is a risk—it might provide the correct result and it might not. The sailors on Jonah's boat had no reason to be fully confident that it would. Certainly Haman, as we understand him, had no reason to be confident of God's support. And while the text of Joshua might imply divine support, the midrash is much more critical of the use of *goral*. The ends do not justify the means.

While the stories do present *goral* as an effective means of determining God's will, we need to focus on what the *mitzvot* and halakha instruct us. The stories of Achan and Jonah were not meant to be normative and need to be understood in the context of the times they occurred. Had they been convincing examples of cases where *goral* should be used and had there not been a second layer of understanding, then it would still be the preferred method today. Ultimately, that would not be very far from *nibush*, even if the methods were slightly different.

The *mitzvot* of *goral* point in a different direction. As we have seen, the use of *goral* to divide the land was intended to be random. Now let us look at the preeminent use of *goral*: the service on Yom Kippur—the most prominent use of *goral* in the Bible, which is also the most difficult to comprehend.

During the Yom Kippur service, two identical goats are taken, and lots are cast to determine which will be brought as a sacrifice to God, and

which will be expelled to the desert.³² Unlike all the previous examples of *goral*, in this instance there is no human doubt which is resolved through the *goral*. The entire Yom Kippur service is performed according to God's commandment, without any human involvement in choosing the steps.

What purpose could the *goral* serve in such a case? Clearly, God did not need to cast lots to determine His own will. But the alternate explanation, that *goral* represents randomness, is no easier. In the human world, events *appear* to us as random. If we flip a coin, we do not know if it will land on heads or tails, so either outcome is equally possible. But if we had information about every possible variable—wind speed, precise weight and shape of the coin, strength in the hand and wrist muscles, etc.—and could enter that information into a powerful computer, we could accurately predict the results.

But for God, obtaining that knowledge is not a challenge. With infinite knowledge, He can predict every coin flip. For Him, there is no randomness. So why cast the *goral* to determine which goat to sacrifice?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik provides an answer in his lecture, "Man Is Vulnerable."³³ Under the heading "Casting of Lots Signifies Uncertainty," he writes:

Thus, the name Purim (*goral*) expresses the erratic capriciousness of events. It alerts the Jew to the sudden turns of fortune, lurking dangers, the fickleness of life, even as the *goral* itself seems to operate through blind chance. Theologically, God forgives man's sinfulness precisely because He acknowledges human vulnerability to changing fortunes, pressing circumstances, and the intrusion of the unexpected. Otherwise, sinful man would always stand condemned before his Maker.... The two male goats were identical, as we previously explained, but their fates led them in opposite directions, as determined by chance (*goral*) decisions, entirely beyond their control. The casting of lots decreed which was to go *Lashem*.... Yom Kippur is in this respect like Purim, both involving a *goral*. The compelling intrusion of the unknown and irrational is basic to man's existential condition and it is precisely this weakness which qualifies him to receive God's compassionate forgiveness on Yom Kippur.³⁴

R. Soloveitchik binds the randomness of the *goral* to our ability to achieve repentance and forgiveness. If we were to accept a fully deterministic view of life, with everything we do controlled by fate, we would have the

³² Leviticus 16:5–10, Mishna *Yoma* 6:1.

³³ Adapted by Abraham R. Besdin, *Reflections of the Rav* (WZO, 1979), 40–50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45–47.

ultimate alibi, and as a result, no need to repent. But on the other hand, if everything is in our control, how could we even try to repent? We made our bed; we are obligated to sleep in it. Therefore, God, in His kindness, introduced randomness into the world, represented by the *goral*, to show us that He understands that we do not control everything. We cannot fully predict or determine the outcome of our actions. That delicate balance between internal and external locus of control grants us both responsibility and hope, and leaves room for repentance, and the opportunity for change.³⁵

R. Soloveitchik limits the theological scope of randomness to human comprehension. “To God there are no accidents, though they often appear so to us,”³⁶ he adds. By having the *goral* at the center of the Yom Kippur service, we are intended to view the world as including randomness.³⁷ God, however, sees the world differently. Nothing is random for God.

With this caveat, R. Soloveitchik conforms with much of contemporary Orthodoxy. The belief that God’s omnipotence requires that He govern every aspect of this world has been the prevalent view in Orthodox Jewish thought for at least the past two centuries.³⁸ In this view, there can be no “chance”—everything is part of the divine plan. Yet, this is not the only approach. In fact, a review of the opinions of the

³⁵ And as Maimonides notes in the *Guide* (3:37), repentance is critical, for without it, if an “individual believed that this fracture can never be remedied, he would persist in his error and sometimes perhaps disobey even more because of the fact that no stratagem remains at his disposal.”

³⁶ Besdin, 48.

³⁷ In a different lecture, “The Duality of Purim,” quoted in *Days of Deliverance* (Toras HoRav, 2007), R. Soloveitchik makes this point even more clear: “There is nothing accidental in nature. Fate and fortune belong to the creation order, which God sanctioned, and as such, there is reasonableness to every event. However, man was admitted to understand certain creation orders, such as the mathematico-physical one, while he was barred from coming close to the *goral* or fate order. He has not been initiated into this order. That is why it appears to him irregular, absurd, and hostile” (13). While nothing is random for God, there is no way for humans to understand *goral*, and therefore we should view it as randomness.

³⁸ For examples across the spectrum of Orthodoxy maintaining the view that God’s omnipotence rules out randomness, see: R. Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, *Da’at Tevunot*, 36; R. Tzadok HaKohen, *Peri Tzaddik*, Shushan Purim 2:1; R. Abraham Isaac Kook, *Ein Ayah, Berakhot* #9; R. Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, *Emuna u-Vitahon*, 2:1. Certainly there are many differences between their approaches, and further discussion is beyond the scope of this essay. For a deeper investigation, see R. Micah Segelman, “Divine Providence and Natural Forces: Conflict or Harmony,” *Hakirah* 19 (2015), 257–272.

medieval sages shows they did not extend divine providence to every action on earth.³⁹

Maimonides in the *Guide to the Perplexed* writes that God's providence does not govern all worldly activity: "For I do not by any means believe that this particular leaf has fallen because of a providence watching over it.... For all this is in my opinion due to pure chance."⁴⁰ For Maimonides, certain natural phenomenon, like the dropping of a leaf, are not under God's purview.⁴¹ This may seem like an insignificant matter, but, in fact, the way an object falls is what establishes how the lots are cast in the *goral* as well. According to this understanding, God has allowed for randomness in His world, where not everything is determined, or even predicted (in any sense that we can fathom), from above.

This is a difficult concept for devotees of religion to grasp. Even those unfamiliar with the theological deliberations over the nature of God intuit that God is fully in control of the universe He created. And at times, it can be comforting to know, given the difficulty of human existence, that everything is part of a divine plan. Yet despite that assumption, we also understand that God carved out room in this well-planned world for human agency and free will. So, is it not possible that there is randomness—a third factor—in His world as well?

A similar challenge faced the world of physics in the early twentieth century. For centuries, the key component of science was predictability. The laws and axioms that science discovered should reliably be able to predict the outcomes of actions. If the unexpected occurred, it was only because the scientist had not investigated deeply enough. But with the development of quantum physics, that entire assumption began to crumble. Its "uncertainty principle" claimed that some particles are governed by randomness, not certainty.

This shocked even such esteemed scholars as Albert Einstein, who famously said, "God does not play dice with the universe." But his

³⁹ For a comprehensive review of the positions of Jewish thinkers over time, see R. Shmuel Ariel, "Is Every Event Directed from Heaven?" [Hebrew], *Tzohar* 28 (2007).

⁴⁰ *Guide* 3:17. See also *Sefer ha-Hinukh* 169: "And there are groups that think that the providence of God, blessed be He, is upon all the matters of the world—whether animals or all other things—meaning to say that no small thing in the world moves without His will, blessed be He, and His decree; to the point that they think regarding the falling of one leaf from a tree, [that] He decreed about it that it should fall, and [so] it is impossible that the time of its falling be even a second later or earlier. And this opinion is very removed from the intellect."

⁴¹ The Ba'al Shem Tov, who led the approach that extends divine providence to all of existence, is said to have told his followers that even the movement of a leaf in the wind is part of God's plan.

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contemporary, the physicist Niels Bohr, is reported to have responded to Einstein, “Stop telling God what to do with his dice!” While there are significant differences between the “pure chance” of Maimonides, and the “uncertainty principle” of Schrödinger, human nature provides similar reactions to both. We feel much more comfortable in a universe where everything can be predicted, even if only hypothetically. We convince ourselves that patterns are present when there are none.⁴² And yet we too must allow for *goral*, for true randomness in our world, if it advances God’s goals.

God’s will is not to have a will for certain things. This creates a space in His world where human free will can function. In that same realm, the unpredictable can also occur. That unpredictability is reflected by *goral*. By creating the world in this way, God enhanced our agency, and gave weight to our moral decisions. In this world, the outcome is not set in advance, and we have the responsibility to choose the proper path. In parallel, we are encouraged to be humble, and know we will never control all situations.

This is the same reason *nibush* is forbidden. *Nibush* (and *goral* understood as a method of divination) is an attempt to obtain certainty in an uncertain world. Maimonides associated astrology and *nibush* with idolatry. This is not only because both were mistaken practices of the ancient world. The need for certainty that drives people to *nibush* is the same impulse that allows idol worship. It is much easier to worship a concrete idol than an abstract, invisible God, whose interaction with people is beyond their control. This was the justification for making the Golden Calf. “When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain... [they said to Aaron], ‘make us a god... for we do not know what has happened to [Moses]’” (Exodus 32:1). Instead of accepting uncertainty they followed a dangerous path, where everything must be certain and arrived at the Golden Calf.

Nibush implies that the world is predetermined, and the proper magical technique will reveal the future. There is no reason to invest in prudent planning and moral actions in such a world. Finding a crystal ball or correctly interpreting the constellations of stars would suffice. *Goral* is only allowed because it does not make those assumptions—it accepts randomness in this world and uses that randomness to help us make decisions.

⁴² This may be related to the grounds for the prohibition of gambling in Jewish law. According to Rami bar Hama in *Sanhedrin* 24b, one who gambles does not consider the roll of the dice to be truly random, but ultimately believes he is destined to win. Therefore, the one who takes his money upon loss is considered a thief.

A world without *goral*, without randomness, would be just as problematic as a world without free will. Every choice would be an intolerable psychological burden. We would be crushed by despair.

In previous generations, where the natural world as well as the political order seemed to control so much of people's lives, there was less of a risk of overestimating a person's free will. But in more recent generations, we have come to believe that we can do anything we set our minds to. That is very empowering and has allowed humanity to advance dramatically in many fields. Yet, despite our accomplishments, we are not all-powerful. We cannot predict every event. *Goral* reminds us of our limitations.

Humans are not suited to situations of uncertainty. We are inclined to find patterns, even when there are none. That is the essence of *nibush*. Randomness is difficult to process because it indicates unpredictability, and we want to feel in control. It is easy for us to convince ourselves that the way events occurred were far from random, because they ended up happening exactly as they did. Looking into the past eliminates that perception of randomness. But we also need to glance into the future, and when we do so, we must understand that the future is unwritten.⁴³ This is also a lesson of *goral*. It does not predict a determined future. And even when we look back on the past, we must understand that the stories we encounter could have been different. The book of Proverbs linked the casting of lots and the decisions of God. The *goral* does demonstrate God's approval. But it shows His endorsement of randomness—not of our futile attempts to find truth that lies beyond our ken.

By playing dice, by casting the *goral*, God did not create a less divine universe; He created a far more sophisticated one. When we understand the biblical uses of *goral* in that light, we can appreciate why He did so.

⁴³ For an extensive discussion of how humans experience and interpret randomness, see Leonard Mlodinow, *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives* (Vintage, 2009).

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